

ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT
Cottonwood Trail

EA Number: AZ-410-2005-0037

Lease/Serial/Case File No. :

Applicant: BLM

BLM Office: Safford Field Office

Location of Proposed Action: Gila Box RNCA

Conformance With applicable Land Use Plan

This proposed action is subject to the following land use plan:

Name of Plan: Safford District Resource Management Plan and Environmental Impact Statement.

Date Approved: Record of Decision (ROD) Part I, September 1992; Record of Decision Part II, July 1994.

The proposed action has been reviewed to determine if it conforms with the applicable land use plan as required by 43 CFR 1610.5.

This plan is in conformance with the applicable land use plan:

CHECK ONE
(X) YES () NO

Remarks: Designate six areas as Special Recreation Management Areas to manage current recreation use. These include the Gila Box/Bonita Creek area. Partial ROD I page 7.

The Safford District would endeavor to provide a variety of recreational opportunities that meet public demand and are compatible with the Bureau's stewardship responsibilities. Partial ROD I page 7.

The BLM needs to enhance and balance the types of recreational opportunities offered in the RNCA. Dispersed recreation will continue in the RNCA. These existing recreational uses include hiking. Gila Box Management Plan pages 11 and 12.

PURPOSE/NEED FOR PROPOSED ACTION

The purpose of this action is to enhance the variety of recreation opportunities available to the public in the Gila Box RNCA by developing a two-mile hiking trail linking the Flying W Group Area to Riverview Campground and interpretative sites including the Watchable Wildlife Area, Kearny Monument, and Serna Cabin. The trail will encourage the public to stay on a maintained path which will provide a safe off-road route for hikers and lessen habitat disturbance. Most of the trail (approximately 1 ¼ miles) will utilize existing access roads developed during past mining operations. Sections of the access roads that the trail is on but are not used will be rehabilitated. Old mining roads which are not part of the trail because they have no view or lead to dead ends will be eliminated. Eliminating and rehabbing the old mining roads will help to decrease off-road/cross country traffic of motorized vehicles.

DESCRIPTION OF PROPOSED ACTION AND ALTERNATIVES

Proposed Action: Develop a two-mile loop trail from the Flying W Group Area to the Watchable Wildlife Area in the Gila Box Riparian National Conservation Area utilizing access roads whenever possible. Approximately ¾ mile of trail will be off-road due to both the unavailability of an access road and the need to keep uses off designated roads for safety reasons. Erosion protection, steps, grade, tread width (not less than 18 inches or more than 48 inches for hikers), etc. will be in accordance with BLM Handbook 9114-1 Trails. Sections of the access roads that the trail is on but are not used will be rehabilitated. Hand tools will be used to clear/remove small plants, stones, and rocks within the trail path. Trail will be defined as needed by parallel rows of local rocks. Directional and interpretive signs will be installed for users. Labor will consist of Safford Field Office staff and volunteers. Trail will be maintained as needed.

No Action Alternative: Visitors would continue to be without a developed trail relying mainly on creek hiking. The BLM would continue to provide information on other hiking opportunities and monitor for use impacts.

ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACTS

Determine Scope of the Assessment: The proposed action was reviewed by the Safford Field Office NEPA Team. The trail has been flagged for site visits.

Issues Identified:

Ground disturbance including soil, vegetation, and cultural resources.

Wildlife – impacts to both habitat and the animals themselves.

Recreation – impacts on non-motorized and motorized off-trail use.

VRM – to what extent would the area look different and would it change the current class.

Critical Elements: The following critical elements of the human environment are required to be considered during the environmental assessment process. None of the critical elements were found to be affected. However, issues related to cultural resources and VRM were carried forward for additional analysis along with other issues raised during scoping.

CRITICAL ELEMENTS (required by federal law)	AFFECTED		CRITICAL ELEMENTS (required by federal law)	AFFECTED	
	YES	NO		YES	NO
ACECS		x	Solid Waste		x
Air Quality		x	T&E Animal		x
Cultural Res		x	T&E Plant		x
Environmental Justice Socioeconomics		x	VRM		x
Flood Plains		x	Water Quality		x
Hazardous Materials		x	Wetland/Riparian		x
Invasive/Noxious Plants		x	Wilderness		x
Native American Rel.		x	Wild & Scenic River		x
Prime/Unique Farmland		x			

Description of Impacts

Soil and Water Resources: There would be some soil disturbance during trail building. The soil displacement would be temporary and not result in any soil loss.

Riparian Vegetation: No trail building within riparian zones. Therefore, no impact

Wildlife: There would be a minimum disturbance to wildlife due to humans working with hand tools in the area.

Cultural: A cultural resource clearance was completed for the project. There are no foreseen impacts to cultural resources. See attached form.

Recreation: Campers and day users will have a developed trail to enjoy which will have access to potable water, restrooms, picnic spots, Riverview Campground, the Watchable Wildlife Area, Kearny Monument, Serna Cabin, the Flying W Group Area, and beautiful views of the Gila River.

Visual Resources: The Gila Box RNCA is designated as a Visual Resource Management Class II area. This trail is entirely within the Gila Box RNCA. Developing a non-motorized trail is within the constraints of visual resource management class II objectives.

No Action Alternative:

Soil and Water Resources: Under this alternative soil and water resources would not be disturbed, therefore, there is no impact.

Riparian Vegetation: No impact.

Wildlife: As a trail would not be built in the area wildlife would continue to use the area free of any habitat manipulation.

Cultural: As a trail will not be built under this alternative, then there is no chance that cultural resource would be impacted

Recreation: Visitors will not have a trail connecting Riverview Campground, the Watchable Wildlife Area, Kearny Monument, Serna Cabin, the Flying W Group Area, and views of the Gila River.

Visual Resources: Since there would be no changes in activities, there would be no impacts to visual resources

Cumulative Impacts

Proposed Action: Eliminating and rehabbing the old mining roads will help to decrease off-road/cross country traffic of motorized vehicles. Developing an interpretive trail linking the Flying W Group Area, Riverview Campground, Kearny Monument, Serna Cabin, and the Watchable Wildlife Area, will provide a new recreation opportunity in the Gila Box RNCA. The trail will encourage the public to stay on a maintained path which will provide a safe off-road route for hikers and lessen habitat disturbance. Maintenance as needed would insure that the route remains enjoyable and traversable by the public. Since the Gila Box Plan was completed in 1998, the SFO has and will continue similar activities on all trails and access routes throughout the Gila Box RNCA for maintenance, throughout the life of the plan. Cumulative impacts for resource, including wildlife, were also addressed in the Gila Box Plan, of which, electronic copies are available upon request.

No Action Alternative: If no action is taken, the old mining roads will not be eliminated and rehabilitated and users will continue to drive off-road damaging vegetation. Hikers will be at risk traveling along access roads and old mining roads due to vehicular traffic. Visitors would not be able to enjoy the experience of an interpretive trail linking the Flying W Group Area, Riverview Campground, Kearny Monument, Serna Cabin, and the Watchable Wildlife Area in the Gila Box RNCA. Not developing a trail within the RNCA from now through the life of the plan, would result in no change to the VRM class.

Mitigating Measures

The project will begin in the fall of 2005 to minimize any possible impact to migrating birds. Any archaeological or historical artifacts or remains, or vertebrate fossils discovered during the project shall be left intact and undisturbed, all work in the area shall stop immediately, and the Assistant Field manager for Planning and Monitoring shall be notified immediately. Commencement of operations shall be allowed upon clearance by the Assistant Field Manager.

Persons/Agencies Consulted: SFO NEPA Team

References: BLM 1991. *Safford District Resource Management Plan, Environmental Impact Statement*. Safford, AZ: BLM Safford District

BLM 1998. *Gila Box Management Plan, Environmental Assessment and Decision Record*. Safford, AZ: BLM Safford Field Office.

List of Preparers: Deborah Morris, Outdoor Recreation Planner

Date: 7/07/05

FONSI/DECISION RECORD

EA Number: AZ-410-2005-0037

Lease/Serial/Case File No. N/A

BLM Office: Safford Field Office

DECISION:

It is my decision to implement the proposed action as described and stipulated in Environmental Assessment AZ-410-2005-0037. Implementing the proposed action would provide a 2-mile hiking and interpretive trail in the Gila Box RNCA from the Flying W Group site to the Watchable Wildlife Area. Included in this trail would be the Kearny Monument and Serna Cabin. Most of the trail (approximately 1 ¼ miles) will utilize existing access roads developed during past mining operations. Roads were not used if they had no view or if they led to dead ends. Approximately ¾ mile of trail will be newly established trail due to both the unavailability of an access road and the need to keep users off designated roads for safety reasons. Erosion protection, steps, grade, tread width, etc. will be in accordance with BLM Handbook 9114-1 Trails. Sections of the access roads that the trail is on but are not used will be rehabilitated. Directional and interpretive signs will be installed for users. Having developed non-motorized trails available for the public will assist in minimizing impacts on natural resources by decreasing off-trail use of the land. Signage can help to reduce off-road motorized traffic. The proposed action resolves defined issues, meets the purpose and need for action, and would not affect any critical elements and other resources described within the Environmental Assessment.

There are no adverse energy impacts.

FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACTS:

Based upon Environmental Assessment AZ-410-2005-0037, I conclude that this action is in conformance with the approved land use plan, the Safford District Resource Management Plan, and will result in no significant impact to the human environment. Therefore, preparation of an Environmental Impact Statement is not necessary.

MITIGATION MEASURES:

Any archaeological or historical artifacts or remains, or vertebrate fossils discovered during construction shall be left intact and undisturbed, all work in the area shall stop immediately, and the Assistant Field manager for Planning and Monitoring shall be notified immediately. Commencement of operations shall be allowed upon clearance by the Assistant Field Manager.

/s/ _____
Assistant Field Office Manager

Date

Date